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ABSTRACT

The academic support system for students at a two-year college is described in this paper. Various sections of the paper discuss (1) procedures for diagnostic testing of academic abilities, perceptual skills, and learning styles; (2) the tutorial program, including staff recruitment and training, program procedures, problems, and evaluation procedures; (3) services for limited English speaking students and the "drop-in" laboratory; (4) the components of the study skills workshops; and (5) the plans for the future of the support system, including the establishment of a developmental center and the acquisition of additional space. (Author/PL)

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ACADEMIC SUPPORT SERVICES FOR STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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Introduction

In a community college with an open-door admission policy, students enroll with a variety of skills, limitations, and assets. Special support services which enable the student to be successful are often needed.

This paper will describe an academic support service at Schoolcraft College, the Learning Opportunity Center. The major components include basic skills assessment, a learning lab, a tutorial program, and study skills workshops.

Learning Opportunity Center

The Learning Opportunity Center is located in the Liberal Arts Building in two classrooms. It is staffed by 2½ coordinators, 2 part-time lab technicians, 14 volunteers, 50 peer tutors, and 2 part-time secretaries. Students are initially interviewed to assess their needs so that appropriate assistance may be provided. Faculty referrals and suggestions for program development are encouraged.

Assessment

Assessment of students involves a variety of techniques. During orientation, incoming freshmen are given a series of tests which include the Nelson-Denny Reading Test, a writing sample, and a math test developed by Schoolcraft College Math Department. Results are shared with the counseling staff before students select their classes. The scores are used for guidance only, not as limiting factors.

When indicated, some students are referred for further diagnostic assessment. A choice of reading tests such as the Woodcock, WRAT, California Phonics Survey, and informal reading inventories offer more specific

information. In addition to the writing sample, spelling is measured by the WRAT, and the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (spelling section). More information about perceptual difficulties may be obtained from the Detroit Test of Learning Aptitude, Specific Learning Disability Test, Quick Screen Neurological, and the Slosson Intelligence Test. Learning styles can be determined by using the Dunn and Dunn or Renzulli and Smith instruments. Finally an interview with each student is scheduled to discuss past academic history and current status. The time involved in individual assessment varies with each student. This process results in an understanding of each student's strengths and weaknessess in order to implement the appropriate support systems.

Tutorial program

Coordinating a successful tutorial program requires on-going recruitment, relevant preparatory training, refinement and development as a result of evaluation, and trouble shooting.

Recruitment

Retaining a staff of peer tutors at a community college requires continuous recruitment since students do not live on campus, and many have other part-time jobs and/or family responsibilities. Most recruitment occurs during the spring and summer when both students and staff have more time for participation in the training process.

Computer grade lists are utilized as the major source for obtaining tutors. Instructor recommendations and self-referrals also contribute to the tutor pool. Potential tutors are then contacted by phone and appointments are scheduled for interested students. The Learning Opportunity Center currently employs about 50 tutors per semester.

Incentives

In order to encourage students to become tutors, a few incentives are offered. In addition to an hourly wage, tutors are eligible to receive a letter of recommendation if their performance is satisfactory. Another incentive is a tutor prize drawing held at the end of the fall and winter semesters for tutors who have completed paperwork regularly. Tutors have the opportunity to win a $25 gift certificate redeemable at the bookstore. The winner is then photographed and interviewed by a reporter from the school paper. At the end of fall and winter semesters, all tutors are invited to an open house where they share ideas about the program and enjoy refreshments with the staff.

Tutor training

Tutor training currently consists of three paid one-hour sessions. The first session includes an interview and familiarization with procedures and forms via a thirty-minute videotape followed by a question and answer period. The second session deals with listening skills, providing structure for the first tutoring appointment and discussing potential problems that may arise as tutoring progresses. The third session focuses on tutoring in specific courses such as math, accounting, and chemistry. Tutors may attend study skills workshops as additional tutor training.

After the initial training sessions, one midsemester tutoring meeting is held during the fall and winter semesters. Any new developments are discussed, and tutors are given an opportunity to share their experiences.

Procedures

The tutoring program is structured. Tutors are provided with a manual that describes the procedures and forms. The following forms are utilized

during the semester: Instructor Contact, to be completed during the first two weeks of tutoring sessions; Tutor Log of Sessions, simplified lesson plans to be turned in at the end of the semester; Time Sheet and Tutor Evaluation of Sessions, handed in bi-weekly; and Absence and Termination of Tutoring when needed.

Problems

Tutor retention, as previously mentioned, is a concern. However, incentives, relevant training, and continued recruitment help to alleviate the situation. Also, moving from individualized tutoring to group tutoring enables tutors to be used more efficiently and minimizes use of the coordinator's time. Another difficulty is getting tutors to complete their forms on time. The tutor prize drawing improved this situation to some degree but did not entirely solve the problem. The secretarial and administrative staff are continually exploring ways to simplify procedures and modify forms.

Evaluation

Evaluation of the tutorial program is accomplished by conducting surveys and gathering statistical information. Questionnaires are sent to tutees inquiring about the effectiveness of the tutorial service. Routinely, tutors are encouraged to offer suggestions and opinions about the tutorial program. The following information is collected at the end of each semester: grades received by tutees, number of hours of tutoring received per student, and tutee termination of tutoring. Based upon the comments from questionnaires and information compiled from grades and logs, 84 percent of students receiving tutoring earned a grade of "C" or above during the fall 1980 semester. Students who terminated tutoring on their own were eliminated

from the percentage. In the near future, the Learning Opportunity Center plans a more intensive evaluation of the effectiveness of the tutorial program.

New programs

Several new programs were initiated during the past year. Free drop-in-tutoring and dial-a-tutor programs were scheduled two weeks prior to final exams. Tutoring was offered in a variety of subjects to aid students in preparing for finals. An adaptation of drop-in-tutoring was instituted for beginning algebra students who did not require one-to-one tutoring. Since beginning algebra is the class for which most tutorial requests are made, it was hoped that money and time would be saved without sacrificing the quality of service. Another new program was implemented last summer when the Learning Opportunity Center coordinated a workshop with the help of the medical records faculty. It was designed to help Schoolcraft College medical records graduates prepare for their national certification exam. Peer tutors were utilized as speakers for the workshop sessions.

Services for the student with limited English speaking ability

LESA students receive individualized assistance with the aid of volunteers in the learning lab. Qualified volunteers work with students on both receptive and expressive language. Students enjoy meeting with the volunteers to discuss current events or review materials they have encountered in lectures or textbooks. Many times a mutually beneficial relationship develops from these sessions. While LESA students begin to feel confident with English, the volunteers feel they are providing a worthwhile service.

Learning lab

Supervision

The learning lab is supervised by two part-time lab technicians who direct a group of fourteen volunteers in aiding students on a one-to-one basis. Information and ideas are shared by continuous interaction with the staff coordinators.

Description

The learning lab is located in a converted classroom. Approximately 15 students can be served comfortably at one time. The lab offers free non-credit assistance in the following areas: reading, study skills, language development, and computational math. Flexible use of the lab results in a range of attendance patterns.

Recordkeeping

In order to determine the number of drop-in students frequenting the lab, individuals sign a book indicating date, name, and reason for using the lab. Files which specify the date, major area of concentration, daily activities, and evaluation are maintained for each students.

Materials

Because the major focus is on process, most students utilize their own textbooks to improve in a specific area. Techniques are demonstrated through the use of audio-visual materials and handouts. However, each student is strongly encouraged to apply the techniques to his particular situation. Special equipment for handicapped students is available.

Evaluation

Evaluation of the lab is accomplished by surveying students who have utilized this service. Preliminary information gathered from the questionnaire indicates students are successfully learning to cope with college work.

Study skills workshops

Free fifty-minute study skills workshops are offered to all Schoolcraft College students on subjects such as notetaking, test taking, building memory, learning styles, etc. During each session information is presented through lecture, handout, and application of techniques. The workshops aid students in recognizing their strengths and weaknesses. Students who experience difficulty may seek additional help in the learning lab. Some workshops have been videotaped to accommodate students who are unable to attend the regularly scheduled live presentations.

Future plans

Credit classes

In order to generate funds and provide structure for the Center, credit classes are proposed. These will include individualized spelling, listening and notetaking, vocabulary development, and test taking techniques. The major objective of these classes will be to develop skills for independent learning and prepare students for entry level college classes.

Developmental center

It is hoped that in the future a developmental center, which will offer a wide range of preparatory classes to all students, will be established. This will help to meet the needs of students entering a community college program.

Additional space

The Learning Opportunity Center has demonstrated a need for an academic support service by tripling student assistance in one semester. Since space is a limiting factor, it is hoped that the current facility may be expanded. More classrooms, materials, and staff are necessary in order to adequately service students who request assistance.

Conclusion

Through a variety of services, the Learning Opportunity Center is attempting to meet the needs of students with varying abilities and backgrounds. As students meet success in college, the importance of available assistance is reemphasized. Therefore, it is felt that these programs are an integral part of a community college.

Clinical Materials

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